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► **To cite this version:**

Anne-Marie Paquet. Love, Death and Desire in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1994, CAPES Curriculum and Other Essays, 07, pp.33-40. hal-02350353

HAL Id: hal-02350353

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350353>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

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*Love, Death and Desire in Toni Morrison's *Beloved**

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Beloved's narrative constantly explores the mechanisms of the drives — whether it be love and death, eating and hunger, or desire at large.² The dynamics of the novel seems to be built on the idea of an "overflow of excess" fighting back but also mirroring Slavery and Memory's containment scheme.

Love and its deprivation as well as desire and its suppression are scrutinized from every imaginable angle. And there is not one single kind of love in the narrative which is not surrounded with ambivalence. In the shadow of Slavery, love and desire inevitably result for the slaves in the destruction or betrayal of another, or of oneself. Sethe's ambivalent brand of motherlove sets the tone: it sustains life, but it also destroys it.

Just like the endless water she voids on *Beloved's* first appearance, love and desire are both figures of excess. "Excess" here is to be understood in its

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². Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: A. Knopf-Random House, 1987).

etymological sense of *excessum*, a "way out," an "exit," from the Latin root *excedere*, "to withdraw from, to die," but also "to go beyond." Both feelings are excessive and consequently refer to limits which have been crossed and boundaries which have been overstepped. The text is fraught with references to limits and sills, whether actual or metaphorical.³ In a world governed by the perverted laws of Slavery, they can be seen as transgressions in themselves, since the slaves were not defined as subjects who could establish their own subjectivity. As Baby Suggs puts it, they were not supposed to have "pleasurable feelings on their own" (209). In other words, "to have pleasure deep down" (209) contradicts the fact that they are mere belongings rather than owners. It points therefore at some dangerous uncontrollable hunger and at the transcendence of the containment imposed on the slaves by the slavemaster. Paul D's tobacco tin opening up and liberating his red heart mirrors the explosive promises of delivery and literal birth which the term "desire" conveys.



Fighting Excess

The narrative's last word — an all-embracing "Beloved" — circles back to the novel's first word, a title projected from a biblical headnote:

I will call them my people,
which were not my people,
and her beloved,
which was not beloved. (*Romans 9:25*)

Instead of reinforcing the erasure of Beloved's character as "Just weather" (275), these circular references testify to the mother's audacious claim of the dis-(re)membered child. Even though she seems to have been drained by the child's greedy, excessive need, love still lingers on, beyond the destructive and narcissistic power of the mother-daughter dyad. The name "Beloved" remains. It displays some residual excess of the mother-infant love relationship which willful forgetfulness will not subjugate.

The reader is then brought back to the beginnings and to the idea of "exceeding the limit." Whatever piece of the puzzle collective disremembering

³. Sethe has to cross many rivers throughout the narrative — the main ones being the Ohio and the Styx, when dragging her children to the other side, "through the veil" (163).

pushes back onto the other side, it nevertheless resists complete enclosure and reenacts love in a more subdued and liveable form. And it happens to be the hypothetical kind of love most characters — except Sethe — seek in the novel. It is some form of "small" love born of controlled desire which will help them stay away from Sethe and Sixo's thick and risky love.

A lack of regulation in love is a common enough theme in Morrison's world. In *Song of Solomon*,⁴ Hagar literally dies of an excess of love for her cousin Milkman. One has constantly to check oneself so as not to be carried away by its destructive overflow. In the world of *Beloved* where all ties can be severed at a moment's notice, all types of love display inevitably reactivates the novel's other lethal trilogy: Love, Death and Desire.

There are two discourses on Love and Desire in the narrative. The first one advocates total love. The second preaches, as opposed to Slavery's excessiveness, the observance of certain rules and limitations, not to repeat its consistent pattern of excess, once on the other side. When Sethe circles around the description of the killing, her own version of love comes into conflict with Paul D's. His stream of consciousness while listening to her quickly pinpoints what their divergent views eventually come down to: two antithetic conceptions of the word "possession." Sethe claims ownership when Paul D shuns it:

Everything belonged to the men who had guns. . . So you protected yourselves and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own . . . Anything bigger would not do. A woman, a child, a brother — a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose — not to need permission for desire — well now, *that* was freedom. (162)

For Paul D, to keep a mental balance is a prerequisite for survival. As opposed to Sethe's overflow, he develops a system of measurement of love which, she remarks, is a contradiction in terms, for "[l]ove is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (164). At the other end of the spectrum and out of necessity, Paul D's accountant mentality functions then as a foil to his lover's "trespass" — which is a term the narrator uses to designate Halle's mistake of tenderly calling Sethe "my wife" (224) in front of Schoolteacher.

Death and/or madness recurrently penalize excessive display of love or desire throughout the narrative, in a way which can prove irreversible for certain characters. When the balance between measure and excess has been destroyed, the only solution for the fugitive slave is to reproduce the original pattern of

⁴. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: New American Library, 1977).

flight. Thanks to a play on its semantic ambivalence, "excess" can now truly function in its etymological sense of "a way out." When Baby Suggs and Paul D cannot fight excess any longer, they choose to retire, to withdraw respectively into mental and quasi-religious retreat. When Baby Suggs' system of love breaks down after the infanticide, she starts pondering colors. Her daughter in law has just committed hubris, mirroring Slavery's worse excess, and Baby proves unable to sustain her containment system of charity and mutual aid any longer. Faced with the ultimate evil, she loses her powerful Call for she does not know "how much" to give any longer. There will not be any more controlled and encoded exchanges with the community members, as in the time when:

Talk was low and to the point — for Baby Suggs, holy, didn't approve of extra. "Everything depends on knowing how much," she said, and "Good is knowing when to stop." (87)

She falls silent. Like Paul D after the revelation scene, when he wonders "how his going would be, how to make it an exit, not an escape" (165), she desperately tries to move outside the dichotomy of love and hate, right and wrong. Even those categories do not work. Both realize that Sethe, just like the Whites, does not know "when to stop" either (87). To her, "delivery" beyond its etymological sense of "birthing" and as "the act of freeing," comes to signify love in death and, eventually, love *beyond* death.



Liberating the love hunger

Sethe is at the heart of this triangular relationship between love, death and desire when she tries to exceed excess or, in Stamp Paid's words, "to outhurt the hurter" (234). As opposed to Baby Suggs and Paul D's restraint, she destroys all borders and introduces chaos into the matrix of 124. In the end, she truly turns, along with Beloved, into a carnival woman, reactivating then the antique notion of the reversal of roles and order on Carnival days. Even when faced with memories that literally devour her, she functions on the mode of excessiveness. The fundamental hunger which inhabits her expresses then a metaphorical greed :

Why was there nothing (her rebellious brain) refused? . . . Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. . . . my brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more — so I add more. And no sooner than I do, there is no stopping. (70)

It also parallels the ghost's grief, "because it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love which was only natural, considering" (209), Denver says. And the only way in which *Beloved* can counter Sethe's boundless production of love is by inventing desire.⁵

The absence of boundaries which characterizes the mother-daughter love in the (con)fusion of voices and bodies, on pages 200 to 217, operates as a figure of the insatiability of need.⁶ In the inevitable vacuum and feeling of emptiness left in Sethe by her child's constant demands lies the dissolution of all systems of values, of all notion of selfhood as well as motherhood. And since desire is by nature unfillable, love can only exhibit itself as a desire for death. At this point, it is not simply motherlove which is a killer, but love itself. Beyond what Paul D called "permission for desire" (199), *Beloved* and Sethe let their basic hunger loose. They liberate their desire and accept any form it may take, while Paul D frantically struggles against it. However, in both cases, whether one fights or welcomes this unquenchable desire, the result is identical. It leads to a virtual dissembling of body and self.

The same image of the broken doll haunts the narrative. It applies both to Paul D and Sethe whenever they come under the ghost's assaults — whenever *Beloved* comes to embody unadulterated Desire: "at the very time and place he wanted to take root — she moved him. From room to room. Like a rag doll" (221). Paul quickly finds out that desire, and especially the sexual hunger he thought he could master, cannot be made subject to simple rules and definitions: it cannot be rendered objective and concrete, and therefore made knowable. Denver picks up the puppet metaphor to describe her mother who "sat around like a rag doll, broken down, finally, from trying to take care of and make up for" (243). Torn apart by "a love that wore everybody out" (243), it seems that the two lovers have first to experience dismantlement and chaos before reaching transcendence. Even though they have already crossed the borderline of the closed world of Slavery, they still labor under its pernicious after-effects. The excess of white law against slave desire cannot even be neutralized by their own decision either to set the limits of one's protective shell, or to define the boundaries of a world which would be forever safe for the beloved.

⁵. As the narrator comments toward the end of the narrative: "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, *Beloved* invented desire" (240).

⁶. See Claudine Raynaud, "Figures of Excess in Morrison's *Beloved*," *AFRAM Newsletter* 3 (Sorbonne Nouvelle: Oct. 1993), p. 142.

In the world of *Beloved*, the characters' drives are proportionate to the magnitude of the threat they have to live with. Before being a man of yearning whose command used to be "Thou shall not covet," Paul D was a walking man. He was constantly on the move so as to avoid being subjected to the excess of Slavery. In the course of the narration, he comes to be the first one to endure the purgatory function of excess. When he finally has sex with Beloved and when the contents of his tin box magically spread around, he is on the verge of transcending the painful process of remembrance.



Healing the hurt

The narrative structure reproduces what Stamp Paid says about Sethe "outhurting the hurter." The text's stories parallel the necessity for the characters to exceed the original hunger and pain so as to break down the so far indivisible triangle of love death and desire. They have to interrupt the cycle of excess in order to reinstate a new code by which to define love and desire. They have to go back to a normed definition which will impel them to move outside the Manichean worldview they inherited from Slavery. They have to abolish the fundamental distinction between the worst and the best (parts of the self, for instance).

As a consequence, the plot revolves around their conception of the others as separate and, eventually, of their own selves as whole. When Paul D comments on his own lack of will when confronted with Beloved, he realizes that she has reactivated in him the old questioning of his manhood. She literally opens up the old hurt again just when "doubt, regret and every single unasked question was packed away, long after he believed he had willed himself into being" (221). His tin lid gives, and his outer shell cracks open, releasing his red heart — what Baby Suggs, pondering oranges over her deathbed quilt, calls "life in the raw" (38). For the first time ever, Paul D lets his naked and therefore vulnerable self come out. His lovemaking with the ghost woman replays the paradox of desire. In his view, being a man entails having total control of oneself, including one's desires. He believes therefore that, if he confesses the unruliness of his desire to Sethe, he will tell her nothing less than "I am not a man" (128). Instead of facing this dilemma, he first repeats the old fugitive slave's pattern of flight. He then resorts to getting Sethe pregnant in order to prove his biological manhood, and when she

turns him down, he deserts her and retreats in the church cellar. It is only at some ultimate stage that he understands he must give up the idea of a physical confirmation of the self — something that children may provide him with. He must, in other words, reconstruct his life without looking for a physical replica of himself. The sense of these rites of passage he eventually gets, when talking to Stamp Paid initiates inner healing for him. Because he accepts to reverse his previous decision to leave Sethe, Paul D is eventually reintroduced to the meaning of love and desire for "a whole woman" (221):

Coupling with [Beloved] wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive . . . and afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. (264)

He swims back up this stream of love and lethal desire. He turns into a survivor who will finally pull Sethe up as well. *He* brings her back to a notion of personhood — which comprises motherhood — and not the other way round. He literally gives her back to herself by wrenching her out of the warped ethical discourse of Slavery: "You your best thing, Sethe" (273). At the same time, he is willing to recognize that desire and the bond it creates between men and women can never become subject to any external verification. He definitely withdraws his body and self, as well as Sethe's, from the reach of Slavery's degradation by removing them from the dichotomy of good and evil. In the end, only "best," the first term of the equation is left over from this dual system of values.

Sethe is now free to reinvest her own self with whatever measure of goodness she wants. Desire and love are now permanently linked up with life, for "there are too many (good) things to feel about this woman" (272).

In *Beloved*, only a few characters achieve a reappropriation of their desire. They reverse the common perception of it within the slave system as a sign of perversion. When the slaves physically cross borders in *Beloved*, they also figuratively go beyond the limitations imposed on them by the slavemaster. In a similar way, their flight pattern, when confronted with excessive love and desire, leaves room for a literal and metaphorical return. It is because Sethe once crossed the line of what should not be done, that she can now sketch the contours of a loving, desiring self.

For those who did not die from excess, irresistible craves turn into more socialized, codified — but more restrictive — forms of yearning. They leave

behind a world in which the constant ambiguity on "human" and "animal" was literally a killer. As Morrison says :

[Sethe] almost steps over into what she was terrified of being regarded as, which is an animal. It's excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender of that commitment, and, you know, such excesses are not good. She has stepped across the line, so to speak. It's understandable, but it is excessive.⁷

Quite literally, *Beloved's* new threesome, Sethe, Paul D and Denver, finds its way out of excess, to more viable forms of social relationships, on the other side from what Lydia Maria Child, in her introduction to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents*⁸, calls "the monstrous features" of Slavery.



⁷. Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility," interview with Toni Morrison, *The Women's Review of Books*, (March 1988) vol. 5 (6), p. 5.

⁸. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1987).